

Towns and regions of Art and History
The Coëvrons-Mayenne region

Architecture is frozen music.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Discover the **story**
of the Abbey of
Evron

The Abbey of Evron

Because of transformations over the centuries, the Abbey of Evron provides in itself an architectural overview of the Romanesque, Gothic and Classical eras.

A site occupied since the Iron Age

The town of Evron, situated thirty kilometres north-east of Laval, was founded when the Abbey was reconstructed in the 10th century.

Discoveries made in the late 20th century, however, indicate that the site itself had been occupied long before. Three Iron Age tombstones were found, the first in 1985 in the foundations of the Gothic choir.

The second was discovered at the foot of the southern transept during work on the square in 1993, while the third was unearthed in Boulay square when the Quatre Vents hotel was demolished.

The Legend of the Thorn

The first mention of a church in Evron occurs in the testament written in 642 by Saint Hadouin, bishop of Le Mans. The Legend of the Thorn tells of a pilgrim who, returning from the Holy Land with a few drops of the Virgin's milk, fell asleep at the foot of the hawthorn where he had hung his bag containing the precious relic. When he awoke, the tree had grown so much that the bag was out of reach. But bishop Hadouin, who was visiting the area, prayed and promised to build a monastery on the site. The hawthorn bent down to return the relic. Thus Notre-Dame de l'Épine, or L'Aubepine (Our Lady of the Thorn, or Hawthorn) was founded in the 7th century, beco-

ming an important pilgrimage destination and a Benedictine abbey. Destroyed during the Breton and Norman invasions of the 9th century, the Abbey's reconstruction began in 989 by order of the Viscount of Maine. This led to the foundation of a monastic village which later became the town of Evron.

The most powerful abbey in Lower Maine

The abbey's prestigious origin and numerous donors quickly made it rich and powerful. From the beginning it founded priories in the surrounding localities of Bais, Neau and Montourtier. These early possessions are known because, in 989 when the abbey was rebuilt, the monks compiled a cartulary listing the priories belonging to the abbey before its destruction.

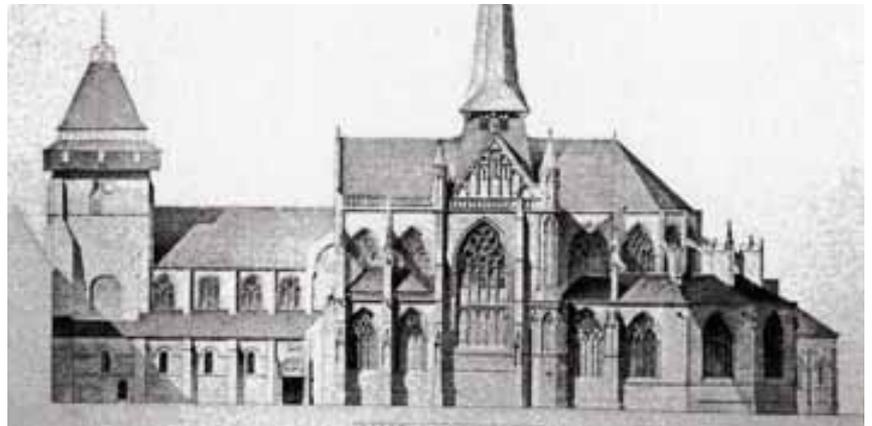
The crypt: a vestige of the original building 1

A crypt was discovered in 1865 during the restoration of the stone floor in the basilica's Gothic choir. Later work in 1985 opened it up to archaeological excavations. This crypt dates from the end of the 10th century and was thus part of the building reconstructed in 989.

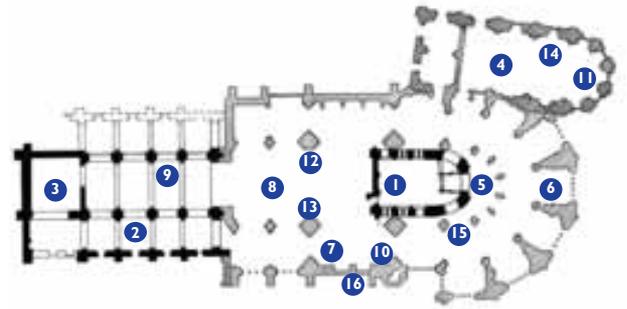
Its vaults were higher than the floor of the nave, and so elevated the choir. This architectural feature is frequent in churches built during Carolingian period. The crypt was composed of a nave and two side-aisles ending in an apse with three wide openings. During the 13th century reconstruction, the vaults were destroyed to put the choir on the same level as the nave.

Numerous modifications

A 19th century engraving of the southern facade of the basilica.



- 9 Virgin with child (13th century painting)
- 10 Angel (Painting)
- 11 Christ in Majesty (Painting)
- 12 Sculpture: Confession and pulling of teeth
- 13 Sculpture: The Adoration of the Magi
- 14 Tapestries (18th century)
- 15 Stained glass windows (14th century)
- 16 Stained glass window (Maurice Rocher, 1951)



The Romanesque church 2

The nave and the Romanesque choir were built in the 11th century. The building was approximately 70 meters long and 25 meters wide. The choir was destroyed in the 13th century but the nave remains, ending in an imposing tower-porch which is an integral part of the abbey buildings. The nave originally had two side aisles. The central nave's stone vault, nearing collapse, was replaced with a lighter wooden ceiling. The southern aisle, however, has preserved its stone barrel vault. The northern aisle was destroyed in 1625 to enlarge the monastic buildings. The Gothic windows of the central nave were installed in the 15th century to provide more light.

The tower-porch 3

It was built at the same time as the Romanesque basilica. The original wide bays were replaced in the 17th century with arrow slits and defensive elements such as hoards and machicolations, making the structure look more like a keep than a bell tower. The big window of white glass with a clock face was created in the 18th century to give light to the base of the tower.

The Saint-Crépin chapel 4

This chapel was built in the 12th century to the north of the Romanesque apse. It was originally separate from the abbey church, but 13th century reconstructions combined the two buildings. The chapel was formerly dedicated to the Virgin but has long been devoted to Saint-Crépin because of a decor in the shape of shoe-soles on one of the arches of the porch. Saint Crépin is the patron saint of shoemakers. The chapel consists of a single nave with groined vaults and a semi-circular apse. In the 14th century, the space was shortened to make room for a sacristy.

The Gothic choir

In the 13th century, the monks of the abbey decided to destroy the Romanesque church and replace it with a building more attuned to the architectural tastes of the time. They built a choir 5 with an aisle giving access to the chapels around it 6. Although dedicated in 1252, the construction was still unfinished: a transept 7 and two spans of the nave 8 were added. Work went no farther, however, probably due to lack of financing. The new construction was separated from the Romanesque nave by a wide diaphragm arch. The Gothic section is 23,50 meters high under the vaults. The nave and the transept are on two levels like its contemporary, the

Cathedral of Le Mans. Light enters through wide bays on the second level, while the first level is embellished with arches. Each transept has a gallery. The gallery of the south transept was perhaps reached by means of a staircase in the tower.

A vanished spire

A spire once rose 70 meters above the crossing of the transept. An inscription on the framework indicates that it had been built in 1606 by Nicolas Brissout. By 1901 this spire was extremely dilapidated and had to be destroyed. It was replaced with a new one, less impressive than the first.

Gothic nave and choir of the basilica



A varied decor

Compared with other churches in western France, the basilica's ornamentation is relatively sober. Sculpture is by far the dominant medium. However, the walls still show vestiges of paintings, and tapestries are hung in the Saint-Crépin chapel.

Fragments of paintings

On the northern wall of the Romanesque nave is a fragment of a painting of the Virgin with Child ⁹. This work dates from the 13th century, when an itinerant painters' workshop created decorations at Bais and Neau. The stylistic resemblance of the paintings at the three sites suggests that they were realized by the same artists. An angel is visible on the southern wall of the transept ¹⁰. The chapel Saint-Crépin is also painted: the vaults of the nave are covered with painted jointing and the vault of the choir bears a Christ in Majesty, surrounded by a Tetramorph (symbols of the Four Evangelists), flanked by Saint Hadouin and Saint Benoît ¹¹. Unfortunately, this painting has suffered from an abusive 19th century restoration.

Vestige of a Virgin with Child on the northern wall of the Romanesque nave. This 13th century mural was doubtless created by the same artists who worked at Bais and Neau.



The sculptures

Since sculptures are resistant to the ravages of time, they are much more abundant here than paintings. Situated in the Gothic sector of the abbey, they consist of capitals decorated with plant motifs, statues on the pillars of the choir, recumbent effigies and high-reliefs on the pillars of the nave. The first relief is on the southern pillar of the first span of the Gothic nave ¹². Composed of two registers, the lower section depicts men suffering from violent toothaches consulting the extractor for relief of their pain. In the upper register, a monk listens to the confession of a kneeling man. The tooth extraction and the confession were placed in the same composition to illustrate the relationship between the two: the believer comes to relieve his soul of sin as he does to relieve his physical pain with the tooth extractor.

Christ in Majesty in the Saint-Crépin chapel, a painting damaged by 19th century restoration.



The other relief ¹³, also on two levels, is situated opposite the first. Its lower section depicts the Adoration of the Magi, while God seems to contemplate the scene from his place on high.

Confession and tooth extractor in the Gothic nave.





Relic of an angel painted under an archway in the southern transept.

The tapestries

Four 17th century Aubusson tapestries are displayed in the Saint-Crépin chapel [14](#). They are classified Historic Monuments and represent scenes from the Old Testament: Lot and his daughters leaving Sodom, Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, Abraham's sacrifice and Jacob's dream (shown below).



Stained-glass windows

The windows of the abbey church date from three different centuries. The stained glass of the choir [15](#) was installed in the 14th century and depicts the legend of the abbey's foundation. The windows of the radiating chapels are 19th century contributions, while the transept windows date from the 20th century. A famous painter, Maurice Rocher (1918-1995), designed the stained glass of the south transept (shown above) [16](#). He was born in Evron and studied under Georges Desvallières and Maurice Denis at the Ateliers d'Art Sacré (art workshops operating in Paris from 1919 to 1947). He began his career by creating stained glass for Normandy churches (later destroyed in the war). Rocher was long and unwillingly categorized as a religious painter. He created the window in 1951 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the abbey's ascension to the rank of basilica. But Maurice Rocher was, above all, an important expressionist painter of the second half of the 20th century.

Gothic choir of the basilica. The windows were installed in the 14th century. The stained glass of the left window illustrates the legend of Notre Dame de l'Epine.



The monastery

Today the abbey consists of a large residence and a garden. Other buildings once stood in the garden on the site of the present agricultural high school.

Classical architecture

At the beginning of the 18th century, the monastic buildings were in poor condition. A new abbatial residence was begun in 1726 to the west of the basilica. Work continued until 1744 but had to stop when only half of the planned building had been constructed. It consists of a long central body flanked by inconspicuous wings and crowned with sculptured pediments. Rooms are well-lit by a profusion of windows: arched bays on the ground floor, unobtrusive masonry around the first floor windows and dormers in the Mansart roof. In the 19th century an extension was added to the north side. On the south side, the entry porch and the annexe are contemporary with the residence but much less decorated. The inside of the Romanesque tower was converted to lodge an impressive suspended staircase with a superb wrought-iron banister. This staircase serves the upper floors as well as the organ-loft. In many ways the abbatial residence resembles the Abbaye-aux-Hommes at Caen. It is possible that it was designed by the same architect: Guillaume de la Tremblaye, a Benedictine monk.



The 18th century abbey residence. Its architect was perhaps Guillaume de la Tremblaye, who also designed the Abbaye-aux-Hommes at Caen.

The monastery becomes an abbey for women

During the Revolution, the monks were driven from the abbey following the institution of a law forbidding regular* religious congregations. The residential buildings remained empty until December 21st, 1803, when the Sisters of the Charity came to settle there. This religious society* had been established by Perrine Brunet in 1692 at Chapelle-au-Riboul. Her purpose was to educate poor girls and to help care for the sick and needy.

By 1789 the society counted 170 members. During the revolutionary period, the site at Chapelle-au-Riboul was sold as National Property and plundered. Once things had settled down, the hospice administrators invited the sisters to take up their former functions. Baron Harmand, Prefect of Mayenne, arranged for them to occupy the Abbey of Evron. The Society became a religious congregation in 1838, but left the residential buildings some years ago.

Also...

Among the treasures of Notre-Dame-de-l'Épine is a statue of the Virgin of the Thorn, formed of sculpted oak embossed with silver and vermillion. There is also a painted wood panel of the 15th or 16th century, formerly an altarpiece, displayed near the Saint-Crépin chapel.

Reliquary bust of Saint Hadouin.
Copper with silver. 1644.

(© J. Le Callonec. Inventaire Général. 1977)



Reliquary bust of Saint Leon.

Copper with silver. 1644.

(© J. Le Callonec. Inventaire Général. 1977)

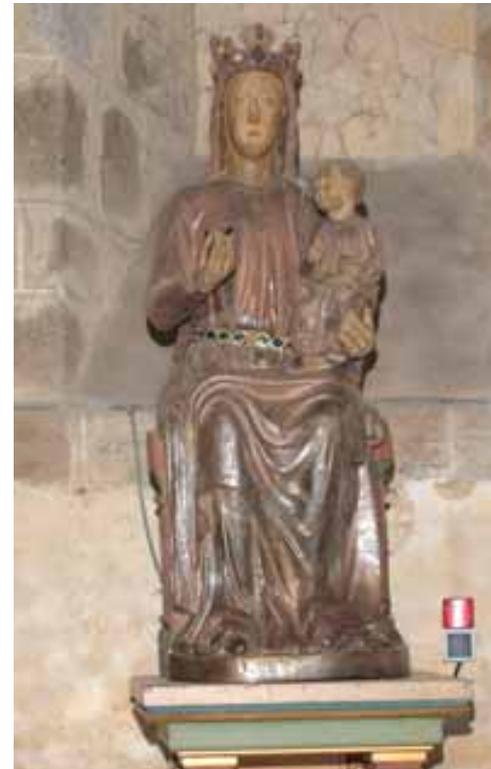
* **Regular religious congregation:** synonym for monastery. A religious community whose members have taken vows and live according to a rule.

Religious society : monastic community whose members have not taken vows. They follow a rule established by themselves and then approved by ecclesiastical authorities.

Notre Dame de l'Épine.

(© Dominique Éraud. Inventaire Général)

The painting represents a Seated Christ with Saint Dominique and Saint Francis on a golden background. There is an early 14th century wooden crucifix and three 17th century terra-cotta statues of Saint Benoît, Saint Maur and Saint Placide. Reliquary busts of Saint Leon and Saint Hadouin are also part of the treasure.





Discover the story of **Coëvrons-Mayenne**, a region of art and history ...
... in the company of a guide-lecturer authorised by the ministry of culture.

The guide will welcome you. He knows all about Coëvrons-Mayenne and will give you the vital elements required to understand the scale of a landscape, the story of the region in its different areas. The guide is there for your benefit, feel free to ask any questions you may have.

The heritage mediation service

runs the region of art and history Coëvrons-Mayenne. It organises events throughout the year for individuals and groups (adults and school children) .

If you are with a group

Coëvrons-Mayenne offers visits throughout the year subject to reservation.

Coëvrons-Mayenne is part of the **national network** of towns and regions of art and history

The Ministry of culture and communication attributes the name of “towns and regions of art and history” to local communities which promote their heritage. It guarantees the skills of guide-lecturers and promoters of heritage and the quality of their activities.

From Prehistory to XXI^e century architecture, the towns and regions present their heritage in all its diversity. A network of 167 towns and regions is currently in existence throughout France.

Nearby sites.

Laval, Le Mans, Angers, Rennes, Vitré, Fougères, Nantes, Guérande, Fontenay-le-Comte and Saumur have been granted the name “town of art and history”; the Perche Sarthois, the Vallée du Loir and the Pays du vignoble nantais have been granted the name “region of art and history”.

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